

The early church was an active community. . . missionary activity and the proclamation of Jesus as the Christ are the outstanding features of Acts. . . Along with the message comes authentication by miracles.

Besides proclamation, the church also enjoys communal life. The believers become a caring community, who worship, study, and pray together.

The believers also care for each other. Acts 4:32–37 indicates how they share possessions with each other to meet their needs. Acts 6:1–6 portrays how they creatively accept appropriate criticism about the treatment of widows and then let those who raised the problem assist in solving it. Even physical needs are the object of the church's attention. One local community in Antioch sends material aid and food to another needy community in Jerusalem (11:29). The church prays, supports, and commissions a missionary endeavor (13:1–3). The church is active in outreach and in supporting the growth of its members (Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts*, 312).

Believing in Jesus has two effects: first, our relationship to people grows, and second, our love to things is lessened. In Luke 12:32–33 Jesus told the disciples, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms." This is exactly what we see happening in Acts 4 and 5. But the verses that follow also impress upon us that the church wasn't without problems. Wherever God is at work, Satan is also at work. We also see that God takes sin exceedingly seriously.

4:32 And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them.

4:33 And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all.

4:34 For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales

4:35 and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need.

The believers have now begun to identify themselves as a congregation. They were united in heart and mind, and freely shared their possessions. As a result, the needs of the members of the community were met.

The apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection with great power, and abundant grace was on them all. Grace can also mean favor, so the point could be either that the preaching was well received by the people, or it could mean that grace was upon the church in freeing the people from material need (Marshall, 115).

Jesus' basic commandment to His followers is for them to love God and others (Lk. 10:25–28). People were selling their possessions to redistribute their resources to those who are in need; they did this by bringing the money to the apostles.

4:36 Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement),

4:37 and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

5:1 But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property,

5:2 and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet.

5:3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land?"

5:4 "While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."

Joseph, also known as Barnabas, is an example of selfless giving. Joseph is a very common name, which may help explain why the apostles called him Barnabas. It was not unusual for people to have more than one name. The name Barnabas means "son of encouragement," a name that summarizes his activity in the Book of Acts.

The contrast between Barnabas and Ananias and Sapphira couldn't be greater. Verses 34 and 35 state that **"there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need."**

Barnabas is an example of one who sold a field and brought the money to the apostles. He is an example of the selflessness and generosity that characterized the life of the early church. In contrast, Ananias and Sapphira are examples of deceitful hypocrites.

This is one of the two detailed judgment miracles in the Book of Acts. The other is in Acts 13:11. In addition, Herod was also judged in Acts 12:23 and a warning was given to Simon Magnus in Acts 8:18–24.

Although the couple claimed to bring the entire proceeds of their sale to the apostles, in reality, they had kept some money for themselves. The story makes it clear that this was done with the knowledge of both Ananias and Sapphira.

Peter speaks as a prophet who is able to read another person's mind and heart. Satan has filled the heart of Ananias to act as he did. "Filling" refers to control or influence, in the same way that the filling of the Holy Spirit does. But the last sentence in verse 4 makes it clear that Ananias is ultimately the one responsible. Peter says to Ananias, "You have not lied to men but to God;" though he was influenced by Satan, he wasn't controlled against his will.

Peter sees Ananias' action as one who thought that he had an external constraint placed upon him, not someone who was giving freely. He emphasizes that no one was forcing him to give; **"While it remained**

unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control?” In other words, nobody coerced Ananias to bring his money to give. If he didn’t want to sell his property or if he wanted to keep some of the sale for himself, he was free to do that. Those who gave to the poor in the church sold their possessions out of freedom and love. But Ananias and Sapphira wanted the credit and prestige of sacrificial generosity without the inconvenience of it; they honored the feet of the apostles more than the eyes of God. Evidently, the desire for human praise was more important than being faithful to God.

The timing of the event is significant. Satan had gotten nowhere by making war against the church; in fact, it was a time of unprecedented blessing. The church had grown in number daily (Acts 2:47); the people in the church and the apostles were finding favor with even the unbelieving in Jerusalem (Acts 2:47). The attempt by the Sanhedrin to silence the preaching of the word had failed (Acts 4:15-22). It seemed that the more Satan opposed the church the more God blessed it, so Satan changes tactics and plants himself within the church to poison it and ruin its testimony. It is no wonder Peter wrote in 1 Peter 5:8, “Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” When Paul wrote to the Corinthians he mentions how Satan tried to take advantage of him, but, he says, “we are not ignorant of his schemes” (2 Cor. 2:11). Satan has strategies, he has schemes, and one of his schemes is to infiltrate the church and destroy its purity. The parable of the tares (Matt 13:37 ff.) illustrates this. Through Ananias and Sapphira Satan had found a window of access into the church.

The nature of Ananias and Sapphira’s deception was hypocrisy; they pretended to be what they were not. God hates pretense. He would not allow hypocrisy into the life of the church. In Matthew 15:8 Jesus had said of the people, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far away from me.”

Hypocrisy is a foolish sin for God sees and knows everything we do - even our thoughts before we think them. It is also a subtle sin for it clothes itself with the appearance of godly piety. It’s easy to appear godly when our hearts are a cesspool of iniquity. Jesus said to the church of Sardis, “I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead” (Rev. 3:1). God looks at the heart.

The seriousness of the deception comes out in verses 3, 4, and 9 when Peter says, “***Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit . . . You have not lied to men but to God. . . Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test?***” (cf. Exo. 17:2; Deut. 6:16). Sin is serious because it is against God. In Psalm 51 David had committed adultery and murder but David says, “Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight” (Psa. 51:4). The source of their deception was Satan; Satan had somehow filled the heart of Ananias while he was part of the fellowship of the people of God. Satan has always been the great deceiver, starting with Adam and Eve.

5:5 And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it.

5:6 The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him.

The aftermath of Peter's remarks is divine judgment against Ananias. As he hears the words he falls and dies. He was immediately wrapped and buried.

Sin that results in sickness and death is mentioned elsewhere - see One Corinthians 11:30; James 5:20; 1 John 5:16–17; 1 Corinthians 5:5; 1 Timothy 1:20.

God wants His people to fear hypocrisy. He means for us to be afraid of treating the Holy Spirit with contempt. Notice at the end of verse 5, after Ananias had died: "**and great fear came over all who heard of it.**" Then again in verse 11 after Sapphira died it says, "And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things." This is the lesson Luke wants us to get: faking faith in the presence of God is a fearful thing.

"Acts 9:31 says, 'So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up; and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it was multiplied.' The fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit bring peace and growth to the church. Treating the Lord with contempt by religious fakery should remain a fearful prospect in the church. God is not mocked. And the Holy Spirit is a great comfort here, because it is precisely by his indwelling power that we become real and authentic" (Piper).

5:7 Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

5:8 And Peter responded to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?" And she said, "Yes, that was the price."

5:9 Then Peter said to her, "Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well."

5:10 And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

5:11 And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things.

When Sapphira arrives she is unaware that her husband had died. Peter begins to interview her. The question he has is simple: was the land sold for a given amount? Sapphira has the chance to tell the truth and rectify the wrong, but she doesn't. She affirms the amount, lies, and experiences her husband's fate. The actions of both Ananias and Sapphira demonstrate that they didn't think that the Holy Spirit could see their sin. The result was fear within the community.

This judgment indicates "how serious sin is to God and how gracious God is in often deferring such judgment. Most sin is not treated so harshly, but at this early stage, such a divine act serves to remind the community of its call to holiness and its loyalty to God. God sees and knows all. Sin is dealt with directly. The resulting fear that the judgment creates is exactly what the passage seeks to engender – respect for God and for righteousness as well as a recognition that sin is destructive and dangerous. There is honesty in this report as well. The church is not a place of perfect people" (Bock, 227).

Piper points out four things wrong with Ananias and Sapphira:

1. They loved their money. They made the sale; they looked at all that cash, and they couldn't bear the thought of giving it all away. So they kept some back (v. 2).
2. They wanted to look more generous than they really were. They wanted the apostles to think that they were like Barnabas perhaps. They wanted external religious approval. They not only loved money, they loved the praise of men—the two almost always go together (Luke 16:14–15).
3. They lied (vv. 3–4). To cover their covetousness and to give the impression of generosity, they lied. If you love possessions and love the praise of men, your love for truth will dissolve into deception and fraud. That's the meaning of hypocrisy.
4. And this always comes with hypocrisy—they discredited the Holy Spirit. Verse 3 says they lied to the Holy Spirit. Verse 4 says they lied not to man, but to God. Verse 9 says they tempted the Lord.

God judged His people. Both Ananias and Sapphira died before God. We need to be amazed at the lengths that God will go through to purge His church over sin. He does this to show the church and the world the exceeding sinfulness of sin. And He still does so in the church today. In 1 Corinthians 11:30 Paul says that “many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep” because they took the Lord’s Supper without proper reverence.

5:12 At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico.

5:13 But none of the rest dared to associate with them; however, the people held them in high esteem.

5:14 And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number,

5:15 to such an extent that they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and pallets, so that when Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on any one of them.

5:16 Also the people from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem were coming together, bringing people who were sick or afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all being healed.

In Acts 4:30 the church had prayed to God, “extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.” Now Acts 5:12 says, ***“At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico.”*** In Chapter 5 we see why the church wanted signs and wonders.

The signs and wonders done through the apostles were extraordinary. Verses 15 and 16 state that ***“they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and pallets, so that when Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on any one of them. Also the people from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem were coming together, bringing people who were sick or afflicted with unclean***

spirits, and they were all being healed.” In Acts 19 Paul also performed many miraculous acts. In Acts 19:11-12 it says, “God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out.”

What are we to make of these miracles? Are these to be typical throughout the ages of the church?

First, we must acknowledge that God is able to do anything that He has done in the Bible and more; He can part a sea or stop the sun in the sky. He can heal and raise the dead. But the question is not what can God do; it is, what is God doing? Though God can do anything that does not contradict His nature, He need not act in the same way in every age. However, when we think of miracles we must keep a number of things in mind.

First, miracles rarely appear in the Bible. When they do appear they appear in clusters at particular times; that is, they occur at key times in redemptive history. They happened at the exodus, during key times in the OT prophets’ ministries prior to the Babylonian captivity, and at the coming of Christ. They happen at four key times in history when God validates and vindicates what He is doing. But since the coming of Christ, the next significant event that we see is at His return; it is then that we will see signs and wonders in the sky above and the earth below. It is then that God will reveal His glory.

Secondly, the people who were doing the signs and wonders were the men who were foundational of the church (Eph. 2:20). They held a temporary, foundational office.

Thirdly, the signs and wonders that we read about in Acts are called extraordinary (Acts 19:11); that is, they are considered to be unusual even for miracles. Miracles already are extraordinary, but these are very rare. These attested to the Christ-centered ministry of the apostles. In Hebrews 2:3-4, in speaking of our salvation it says, “After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard (the apostles), God also *testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles* and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.”

Although God can and does still do miracles today, we should not look for patterns that belong to particular eras in redemptive history. We should not try to imitate what took place in Acts as events that are normative. Whether we believe that God performs miracles today in this fashion or not, we must admit that the miracles of Jesus and the apostles were in some sense unique and necessary for a moment in history that gave us the foundational doctrines of faith and the New Testament.

Verses 13 and 14 describe two results of this demonstration of signs and wonders. First, the people of Jerusalem stood in awe of the apostles and the church. Ananias and Sapphira had died, signs and wonders were being done, and verse 13 says, “***none of the rest dared to associate with them.***” It does not state why some dared not associate with the apostles. Some speculate that it was fear from having heard what had happened to Ananias and Sapphira. Others think that the people were fearful of reprisal by the Jewish leadership; but in the midst of this fear and amazement and wonder, many were coming to faith in Jesus. Verse 14: “***And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were***

constantly added to their number." There is thus a connection between the signs and wonders done by the apostles in verse 12 and the multitudes being added to the Lord in verse 14. This tells us why the church prayed so earnestly for signs and wonders to be done; namely, it was through signs and wonders that people came to saving faith.

This is the pattern in the Book of Acts. At least 17 times in the book a miracle helps lead to conversions (Piper). Tongues at Pentecost lead to 3,000 converts. The healing of the lame man in Acts 3:6 lead to 2,000 converts (Acts 4:4). In Acts 9:34–35 Peter heals Aeneas and Luke says, "And all who lived at Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord." Peter raises Tabitha from the dead, and Luke says, "It became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord" (Acts 9:42).

The working of miracles, signs, and wonders helped bring people to Christ. That is why the early church wanted God to stretch forth his hand and heal and do signs and wonders. These phenomena would help bring people to Christ.

Acts 14:3 says that Paul and Barnabas "remained a long time [in Iconium] speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands." Signs and wonders are God's witness to His Word; they are God's secondary testimony to the Word of His grace. As Piper says, "Signs and wonders do not save. They are not the power of God unto salvation. They do not transform the heart—any more than music or art or drama or magic shows. What changes the heart and saves the soul is the self-authenticating glory of Christ seen in the message of the gospel (2 Corinthians 3:18–4:6). But even if signs and wonders can't save the soul, they can, if God pleases, shatter the shell of disinterest; they can shatter the shell of cynicism; they can shatter the shell of false religion. Like every other good witness to the Word of grace, they can help the fallen heart to fix its gaze on the gospel where the soul-saving, self-authenticating glory of the Lord shines."

Of course, this does not validate or invalidate signs for today. Thus, this does nothing to prove that we are to look for signs, wonders, and miracles today. Of course, the Book of Acts does not prove that signs, wonders, and miracles ended either. In the historical context they had a distinct function as new revelation was being proclaimed.